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11. (SBU) Summary. Both critics and supporters of Chiapan developmental policies agree that the Mexican government (GOM) and the USG should dedicate more attention and resources to the southern border. The poorest state in Mexico, Chiapas is plagued with economic problems that are further complicated by the rise of organized crime, a vulnerable border with Guatemala, and alleged human rights abuses of indigenous and migrant populations. Chiapan officials proclaim that economic and social development are priorities, though some in the NGO community remain wary of the state government's underlying objectives. End summary.

Geo-Political Landscape

12. (U) Chiapas, Mexico's southernmost state, shares a 650 kilometer border with Guatemala. As the poorest Mexican state, Chiapas suffers from the second highest rate of malnutrition in the country, estimated to affect more than 40% of the population. Chiapas also has one of the largest and most diverse indigenous populations with approximately one million indigenous language speakers over the age of five, accounting for 27% of the state's population. About one quarter of the population is of full or predominant Mayan descent, and in rural areas, many do not speak Spanish. The poverty affecting the marginalized lower classes - largely made up of indigenous groups - contributed to the Zapatista uprising in 1994 and the creation of other insurgent groups seeking political and economic autonomy. The increasing presence of Central American gangs known as "Maras," illegal immigration from Central America, and the rise of organized crime further burden this already strained state.

13. (SBU) Juan JosC) Sabines Guerrero became the governor of Chiapas in 2006. Originally a member of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), Sabines joined and became a candidate of the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) after the PRI denied him the party's candidacy for governor. Politically speaking, Chiapas is largely a PRI and PRD stronghold with seven PRI and five PRD federal deputies. The three Chiapan senators are from the PRI, PRD, and the Green Party (PVM).

Rural Cities on the Rise

14. (SBU) One of the biggest challenges for the Chiapan government in addressing poverty is reaching the thousands of secluded, indigenous communities throughout the state. Many of Chiapas' delays in development are due in large part to the marginalization of indigenous people and the inaccessibility of

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their communities. For example, Chiapas has over 5,000 communities with less than 700 inhabitants. Without access to these communities, it is difficult for the government to provide schools and other services where they are needed most. To address this dilemma, the governor has created rural cities, a concept originally developed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, to help rural indigenous communities develop by bringing social services programs and attracting investment to impoverished areas. The Chiapan government plans to relocate 31,050 people who currently live in communities far from state resources and infrastructure with a view to restructuring the rural economy and combating the demographic dispersion of Chiapas' population. In 2008 the Chiapan government constructed eight rural cities, hoping to reach a total of 25 during the six-year mandate of Governor Sabines. PolOff spoke to members of the indigenous community as well as representatives from NGOs based in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas who criticized the government's efforts in this area, arguing that bringing together different indigenous communities can be problematic, as those forced off their land to join other indigenous communities resent having to leave their homes for the sake of creating a rural city. Often, they are asked to leave their communities to provide space for investors looking to buy the land. Several researchers and members of civil society argue that rural cities are designed to fulfill counterinsurgency and social control functions instead of alleviating poverty.

Economic Development Projects

15. (SBU) PolOff met with the Secretary of the Chiapan Economics Secretariat, Maria del Rosario de Fatima Pariente Gavio, and Undersecretary Claudia de los Angeles Trujillio Rincon, to discuss economic challenges in the region. According to Rincon, Chiapas is not severely affected by the global economic crisis, as foreign investment in Chiapas has continued to rise. WalMart, for example, has opened 17 stores throughout the state in the last three years, creating a significant number of jobs. The government also supports microenterprise and has created business programs such as "Mi Tienda," (My Store) and "Mi Tortilla" (My Tortilla), which help small-time producers increase their productive capacity and competitiveness. Recognizing the value of indigenous artisan work in the region, the Secretariat is working to create an international brand called "Chiapas Original" which it plans to use

to sell Chiapas-made indigenous handicrafts globally. The government views this project as part of a development strategy that will help indigenous communities sell their products to customers worldwide, though some in the indigenous community are skeptical as to whether they will benefit from such a program, believing the government will retain the majority of the profit.

16. (C) One of the government's most controversial development projects is the creation of a road between San Cristobal de las Casas in the north-central part of the state and the popular tourist destination of Palenque near the Guatemalan border. PolOff met with Diego Cadenas Gordillo, Director of the local NGO Human Rights Center Fray Bartolome de las Casas (FrayBa), in San Cristobal de las Casas. He maintained that the road would cut

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through the lands of indigenous groups that live in the highlands of the city of Comitan in the center of the state and around San Cristobal. The indigenous groups affected insist they were not consulted in the decision-making process, and as of yet, have not received compensation for their land.

Southern Crossing Not Quite a 21st Century Border

17. (SBU) The southern border remains highly porous with illegal immigrants crossing from Guatemala into Chiapas on a daily basis. PolOff met with Jorge Humberto Yzar Dominguez, head of the National Institute of Migration (INAMI) in Tapachula, Chiapas late last year to discuss migratory trends and security concerns. Tapachula, a border town in southwestern Chiapas, is a principal point of entry for people crossing into Mexico from Guatemala. Those crossing legally tend to be seasonal local and regional laborers from Central America. According to Yzar, Immigrants detained after crossing the border illegally are mostly Guatemalan. The rest are either from Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, or from Cuba, Eritrea, Mali, Ethiopia, and occasionally from China, Russia, and Iraq. INAMI officials reported seeing a decrease in the flow of migrants crossing the border into Tapachula following Hurricane Stan in 2005. The storm destroyed a significant part of the train track leading from Tapachula to the northern part of the state, making it more difficult for migrants to make their way north.

18. (SBU) Mexican immigration and customs officials find it difficult to monitor the expansive border between Chiapas and Guatemala. During her visit, PolOff toured three border points of entry: Ciudad Hidalgo I, Ciudad Hidalgo II, and Talisman. Ciudad Hidalgo I is largely a pedestrian crossing, though some passenger vehicles cross as well. This point consists of one bridge over the Suchiate River that separates the Mexican municipality of Suchiate from the Guatemalan border town of Tecun Uman. Along both sides of the bridge, PolOff could see at least 50 people crossing the Suchiate River illegally into Mexico. PolOff asked the INAMI officials why these people were not apprehended when they could clearly be seen from the immigration post. INAMI officials conceded that there was little INAMI agents could do because they were not armed and, thus, not in a position to confront any possible aggressors. Mexican Customs officers are armed, but only a few work at Ciudad Hidalgo, and more could not be spared to monitor the illegal entry points. INAMI officials explained, however, that several check points are located throughout the state of Chiapas and that even if the immigrants get through the first check point on the border, they will likely encounter others as they make their way north. PolOff drove north through Chiapas and encountered three

of these checkpoints exiting Tapachula on the main road north to Tuxtla-Gutierrez, but did not observe the Customs officers on duty checking vehicles as they passed through.

¶9. (SBU) In a meeting with Javier Morales Aguilar, director of Aduanas (Mexican Customs) in Tapachula, Morales conveyed his concern about the low number of Aduanas personnel on the southern border. Aduanas only has 130 employees to patrol 11 points of entry over the 650 kilometer southern border. Per reftel, 49 out of 100 of Morales' Customs agents were replaced after failing the vetting

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process late last year. The vetting process involves financial and criminal background checks as well as polygraph exams - most agents failed the polygraph. Morales conceded that it is taking some time to train the new agents, leaving him with less than 100 trained customs officers. The majority of his agents are located on the three main points of entry, Ciudad Hidalgo I and II and Talisman. He has a few agents in some of the more difficult points of entry but is unable to communicate with them on a daily basis. Morales told PolOff that the agents are equipped with cellular phones, and that communicating with the agents - some of whom are located in the jungle on the Chiapas/Guatemala border - is difficult due to unreliable phone lines and bad reception.

¶10. (C) Chiapas State Police (SSP) Jose Luis Solis Cortes expressed his frustration at both the Mexican and U.S. Governments' lack of interest in the southern border. According to Cortes, a significant flow of Russian, Chinese, and Korean arms cross the southern border into Mexico from Guatemala and El Salvador. Although the Chiapas SSP has met with several U.S. law enforcement agencies, including the Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms Agency (ATF) and the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), Cortes feels that there needs to be more shared intelligence and collaboration between the two countries to stem the flow of illegal arms and drugs across the border. Cortes articulated the need for a more permanent U.S. intelligence, ATF, or DEA presence in Chiapas and requested U.S. training for his police forces in weapons identification, akin to that offered to the Federal Police (AFI) and other law enforcement agencies such as Aduanas and INAMI. PolOff asked Cortes about the possibility of organized crime groups, such as the Zetas, infiltrating indigenous communities in Chiapas. Cortes said that he did not believe the indigenous communities of Chiapas were involved in organized crime, though he admitted that armed groups would find it easy to hide within indigenous territories because of their remote locations.

¶11. (SBU) The Chiapas Secretariat for the Southern Border (SFS) has been in existence for about a year and deals solely with migrant issues while coordinating activities with all agencies that come into contact with migrants, including the SSP, the Attorney General's Office (PJE), the Department of Health, and INAMI, among others. Its director, Andrea Hernandez Fitzner, agrees with INAMI officials that fewer migrants cross the Southern border, possibly due to the drop in coffee prices leading to a decreased need for migrant workers. Fitzner stressed that migrants in Chiapas confront serious security threats on a daily basis. Trafficking networks or organized crime groups such as the Zetas or Maras often beat, rob, or kidnap migrants as they make their way north. Fitzner urged that both the USG and GOM remain alert to the increase of young recruits from El Salvador who align themselves with the Zetas in Chiapas.

NGOs Raise Concerns on Human Rights Abuses and Organized Crime

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¶12. (SBU) Father Flor Maria Rigoni, a priest from the order of the Scalabrinians and Director of Casa del Migrante, a migrant shelter in Tapachula, Chiapas told PolOff that the majority of migrants seeking shelter come from Central America, though in the last year Father Flor also provided shelter to approximately 50 Iraqi families and a handful of immigrants from Bangladesh, Nepal, and the Horn of Africa. Father Flor recounted that until recently, military and police violence against migrants was prevalent, but that incidents of abuse had decreased by at least 80% since the deployment of a new army general to the region earlier this year. There has also been a decrease in police abuse against migrants.

¶13. (C) According to Father Flor and information received from migrants he encounters on a daily basis, the Zetas and other organized crime groups involved in the trafficking of arms, drugs, and people, are seeking control of southern migratory routes. Father Flor believed that the human trafficking problem, particularly the trafficking of women and girls, was increasingly a problem on the southern border and warned of society's desensitization to its ills. As a result of his work with trafficking victims and his public posture against organized crime groups involved in human trafficking, Father Flor felt he was a target for both organized crime groups and corrupt officials within the local government. In recent months, he had seen unmarked vehicles driving back and forth in front of his shelter and had received anonymous and intimidating phone calls. Although he reports what he sees and hears to local authorities, they are not responsive. While he would not divulge their names, Father Flor told PolOff that during conversations with both state and federal government officials, he was told to "back off" his efforts to denounce organized crime and to focus more on the humanitarian aspects of his work.

¶14. (C) Father Flor suspected that organized crime groups had continued to infiltrate the Chiapan government. He believed that the stain left by the corrupt former Chiapas attorney general and drug czar Mariano Herran Salvatti was still present at high levels of the state government. Father Flor requested that the U.S. increase its focus on the southern border and called for a more permanent U.S. presence in Chiapas for law enforcement purposes. Gordillo of FrayBa also agreed that in the last couple of years, organized crime groups had become more entrenched in Chiapas, particularly on the southern border. In 2006, Gordillo's contacts in La Selva, the southeastern region of Chiapas, reported seeing what they believed to be GOM - marked planes land at the border with drug shipments. Some of the indigenous people Gordillo worked with were paid by the narcotraffickers - said to be part of the Sinaloa cartel - to unload the shipments. The indigenous workers told Gordillo that both Customs and military officials stationed there received \$150,000 Mexican pesos for each plane that landed and was unloaded. Gordillo said he provided this information to CISEN (Mexican intelligence), but was told to "forget about it." With a military base a few kilometers away from where the planes landed and unloaded, Gordillo found it hard to believe that some government officials were not complicit in the cartel's activities.

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¶15. (SBU) Gordillo also expressed concern about two on-going human rights cases in Chiapas. In the case of Acteal (Note. The Acteal Massacre occurred in December 1997 when 45 indigenous peasants were murdered. End Note.), 87 people were arrested for their role in the massacre, 20 of whom were set

free on August 13, 2009 due to technical irregularities and administrative errors committed by Mexican prosecutors who handled the case. FrayBa is pressuring the GOM to prevent the release of an additional 35 suspects identified as having played a role in the event. According to Gordillo, while there may have been administrative errors, many of the individuals set free either confessed to having committed the crime or were identified in line-ups by the survivors of the massacre who in many cases were family members or long-time acquaintances of the aggressors. FrayBa feared that those released may seek revenge against the survivors of Acteal, many of whom testified against the suspects in court. Gordillo also pointed to the case of political prisoner and community organizer Jose Manuel Hernandez Martinez ("Don Chema") who was unexpectedly transferred from a prison in Chiapas to a maximum-security prison in Tepic, Nayarit in October. Martinez was arrested in September by agents from the PGR and the Chiapas PJE for allegedly being a member of the Popular Revolutionary Army (EPR), a clandestine and armed insurgent organization. According to Gordillo, however, the GOM had not presented any formal accusation or proof that Martinez was part of the EPR.

¶16. (C) Many NGOs in Chiapas said they felt increasingly threatened by the GOM. Both FrayBa and the San Cristobal based NGO SiPaz accuse the GOM of harassing effective community org anizers - most of whom practice unarmed and non-violent resistance - and accused them of belonging to the EPR. In recent months, GOM officials accused FrayBa of inciting violence among indigenous communities in preparation for the Mexican Bicentennial. Gordillo rejected this accusation stating that FrayBa and the Roman Catholic Diocese of San Cristobal promote peace and justice and do not encourage others to take violent action against the government. Gordillo noted, however, that some left-winged armed groups like the EPR would likely take some violent action against the GOM in 2010.

¶17. (SBU) Comment. A vulnerable border, the rise of organized crime, extreme poverty, and dissatisfaction of indigenous communities are problems that will continue to impact the social and economic development of Mexico's poorest state. It appears the governor is making efforts to address some of these problems, but Chiapan citizens are not optimistic about prospects for improvement. Their distrust of the government, particularly at the state level, is based largely on a history of previous corrupt and ineffective local officials. Both the citizens of Chiapas and state government officials, however, agree that the GOM and USG need to dedicate more attention and resources to the southern border to overcome the security, social, and economic challenges affecting the region. End Comment.
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